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UT researchers exploring how much people trust public health information on COVID-19

A study was done by researchers at UT Austin's School of Information and looked at the factors that influence trust in health information about COVID-19.

UT study looks at distrust of COVID-19 public health info

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AUSTIN, Texas — A group of researchers at the [University of Texas at Austin](#) are exploring what influences trust in health information about [COVID-19](#), hoping to help with public health messaging about how to minimize the spread of the virus.

"So it may be important that in our public health messaging we not only convey the important message of how you can protect your community, but also make sure that people who are more self-focused will see the importance of protecting themselves, avoiding hospitalization or potential death from COVID-19," said Professor Kenneth Fleischmann with [UT's School of Information](#).

The research

Fleishmann, along with colleagues Professor Bo Xie (School of Nursing and School of Information), Min Kyung Lee (School of Information) and more conducted an online survey with 509 participants. Of those, 259 were adults aged between 18 and 64 years old, and 250 were adults that were 65 or older.

Among other parts of the survey, a factual quiz on COVID-19 was given to participants, as well as a questionnaire on where the participants get their information on COVID-19.

"So we looked at trust and mass media, social media and direct personal contacts, which would include friends, family," said Fleischmann. "So we looked at a wide range of demographic factors. We also looked at many different aspects and, for example, where people consume information, which media sources, whether it's mass media, social media or direct personal contacts and the degree to which they trust the different outlets."

Additionally, the group setup a sort of exam on how well participants understand COVID-19.



Credit: Luis de Leon

Signs encouraging social distancing on UT's campus.

Findings

Fleischmann told KVUE on Thursday one of the findings was that the group of older adults in the study had higher factual knowledge than younger adults in the sample.

"We found that there were more higher number of accurate answers, significantly more correct answers, among our older adult population than our younger adult population," Fleischmann said. "So it means that the older adults are our better informed about COVID, including how to prevent the spread of COVID and what to do if you think you might be infected with COVID."

According to the group's exam results on participants, the 250 adults aged 65 or older scored an 89%, while the 259 participants aged between 18 and 64 scored an 84%.

"It indicates that although in many cases there we think of younger adults as being the most informed, you know, with the most access to social media and so many different media sources and media outlets, and we normally think of that as a good thing," Fleischmann said, "but in a lot of cases, of course, social media is used to spread mis- and disinformation on many topics, including COVID-19. So that access to so many different media sources might actually be a disadvantage in the case of health, public health crisis like COVID-19."

Fleischmann explained another one of the findings was that people who valued helping others and "cared more about others" have higher factual knowledge on the virus than those who were more interested in themselves.

"A lot of the public health messaging that we've seen has focused on how you can help your community, how you can help people who are vulnerable by avoiding getting COVID-19. Perhaps that messaging misses the mark a little bit with people who focus on themselves," Fleischmann said.

Credit: Luis de Leon

A person wearing a mask on UT's campus.

When it comes to trust of mass media and social media, Fleischmann said they did not find a difference in younger and older adults in their sample in terms of trust with direct personal contacts, but they did find a difference in terms of trust in mass media and social media.

"And older adults are more likely to trust mass media. Younger adults are more likely to trust social media. So we found that people who had higher trust in and higher use of mass media had higher factual knowledge about COVID-19," Fleischmann said. "Both were positively correlated with factual knowledge. So basically, watching more TV news teaches more people more about COVID-19 and gives them more knowledge, and that was not necessarily the case for social media."

Fleischmann also iterated these are preliminary results and a final full report was being finalized that will be published at a later date.

The research was funded by a [National Science Foundation](#) RAPID grant.

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